



## The Urban Child Institute Mission

The Urban Child Institute is a non-profit organization dedicated to the well-being and health of children from conception to three years old in Memphis and Shelby County. We are a data-driven, result-oriented coalition of researchers, strategists, practitioners, parents, and community members dedicated to turning knowledge and research into measurable change.

The Urban Child Institute is working to become a recognized leader in child advocacy research, a trustworthy community partner, and a place of choice for expertise, advice, and collaboration for those who want to improve the lives of children in Shelby County, Tennessee.

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## Data Book Purpose

The State of Children in Memphis & Shelby County was created by the Institute and first published in 2006. The initial purpose was to collect the best available data on children in our community. Many individuals and organizations were gathering important information on children, but the 2006 “Data Book” was the first time that the data had been assembled in a single document.

This 2012 volume continues to track and update the data. It has also become more focused on our community’s youngest children, specifically those under age three. Additionally, the Institute is excited that the new Data Book includes contributions from some of our community’s top experts in various fields related to children’s well-being.

We hope that the Data Book will be a useful tool for government leaders, service providers, educators, and all community stakeholders who desire positive changes in Memphis and Shelby County. We believe that the evidence it presents for the importance of children’s earliest years provides clear direction for community efforts to improve the lives of our children and the future of our community.

## 2012 Introduction

The Urban Child Institute has laid down the gauntlet: all young children in Shelby County must reach kindergarten fully prepared to learn and thrive.

The more we understand about the relationship between early brain development and lifetime success, the clearer it becomes that early experiences matter for shaping later outcomes, both for individuals and for the community.

Will a child develop a rich vocabulary? Will he become a strong reader? Will she develop the self-confidence needed to start school? These are key building blocks not only for kindergarten readiness, but also for school achievement, on-time graduation, and college enrollment. The foundation for these elements of success is established long before a child ever reaches school.

To increase children's kindergarten readiness, we need to understand the risks that threaten optimal development, as well as the experiences and interventions that help children beat the odds and thrive in school and life.

As the Data Book makes clear, many children confront adversity in early childhood. Over half of children in Shelby County live in low-income families. Children who face economic hardship in their early years are at far greater risk for poor life outcomes. These children are dealing with the toxic stress of residential instability, fragile families, and uncertain health, nutrition, and safety. Children in high stress environments must focus on learning to survive rather than learning to thrive.

While these risks are all too real, they tell us little about the experiences of individual children, and almost nothing about why some children beat the odds.

To understand the full story, we also need to identify the early experiences and interventions that help to protect children from adversity and toxic stress. This year's Data Book touches on three promising interventions. The first, the **Nurse-Family Partnership**, is a home visiting program for at-risk, first-time mothers. The program offers some of the strongest scientific evidence proving that high-quality interventions can move children and families from high-risk environments to a strong developmental pathway.

A second intervention making a real difference in our community is high-quality pre-kindergarten. Consistent with findings from across the country, pre-kindergarten in Memphis leads to stronger early language skills and promotes kindergarten readiness.

Finally, **Shelby County Books from Birth** brings more good news. A recent evaluation of that program found that Books from Birth is associated both with stronger family reading practices and higher measures of kindergarten readiness.

These are the types of real intervention moving children in our community from risk to resilience, leading not only to kindergarten readiness but also to life-long success.

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